DRAFT DECISION NOTICE
GIBSONVILLE HEALTHY FOREST RESTORATION PROJECT
U.S. FOREST SERVICE, PLUMAS NATIONAL FOREST,
FEATHER RIVER RANGER DISTRICT
SIERRA COUNTY, CA

DECISION

I have read the Gibsonville Healthy Forest Restoration Project (Gibsonville Project) Environmental Assessment (EA), reviewed the analysis in the project record including documents incorporated by reference, and fully understand the environmental effects disclosed therein. Based upon my review of all the alternatives and the comments received from the public for this project, I have decided to implement Alternative B. Alternative B is described fully in the Gibsonville Project Environmental Assessment and supporting project record documents.

This decision will apply a combination of vegetation treatments within the 1,200.5 acre project area including removing hazard trees, variable density thinning, thinning from below, hand thinning, masticating, pile burning, and prescribed burning. This decision will implement strategically placed mechanical and hand fuels reduction and vegetation management treatments; protect archeological features from looting, damage from standing dead tree fall, and wildfire; release aspen stands; restore meadow, alder, and riparian areas; and control invasive plants using manual treatments or burning.

I am responsible for evaluating the effects of the project relative to the definition of significance established by the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1508.13). In the finding of no significant impact (FONSI) I determined that the proposed action or the action alternative would not have significant effect on the quality of the human environment. As a result, no environmental impact statement will be prepared.

Implementing Alternative B will ensure that the purpose and need, especially those to improve forest health and to reduce hazardous fuels accumulation are accomplished, and provides balance by limiting mechanical treatments to those intended to maintain or improve habitat conditions, in the short-term, within existing suitable habitat for California spotted owl.

I have decided to treat (Figure 1):

- 202.0 acres by removing conifers less than 30 inches diameter at breast height (DBH) by individual tree selection using a variable density thinning (VDT) and biomass conifers 3 to 9.9 inches DBH, resulting in densities of 74-122 trees per acre;

- 59.8 acres by thinning from below conifers less than 30 inches DBH by individual tree selection and biomass conifers 3 to 9.9 inches DBH, resulting in densities of 122-186 trees per acre while retaining 50 percent or greater canopy cover;
- 41.3 acres of historic Gibsonville town site to protect archeological features from looting, damage from standing dead tree fall, and wildfire by removing hazard trees, conifers less than 30 inches DBH by individual tree selections, as well as biomass and/or hand cut conifers 3 to 9.9 inches DBH;
- 22.8 acres of aspen release by removing conifers through individual tree selection including saw logs 10 inches DBH and greater, and biomass conifers 3 to 9.9 inches DBH;
- 24.7 acres of meadow, alder, and riparian restoration stands by removing conifers using individual tree selection within including saw logs 10 to 16 inches DBH, and biomass and/or hand cut conifers 3 to 9.9 inches DBH;
- 171.1 acres of mastication or biomass removal of conifers up to 9.9 inches DBH, resulting in densities of 122-186 trees per acre;
- 472.8 acres by hand cutting, piling, and pile burning conifers up to 9.9 inches DBH, resulting in densities of 186-298 trees per acres;
- 32.2 acres of underburn only;
- 173.7 acres will receive no treatments;
- 5.5 miles of hazard tree removal within 200 feet of roads and structures; and
- invasive plants throughout the project area by hand pulling and removing or burning.

This decision includes commercial-sized timber and smaller material as biomass for sale, firewood, or other small-log uses; and to pile and burn slash resulting from treatments. The analysis supports and this decision authorizes multiple entries over the next 15 to 20 years for hand thinning, mastication, and/or prescribed burning.

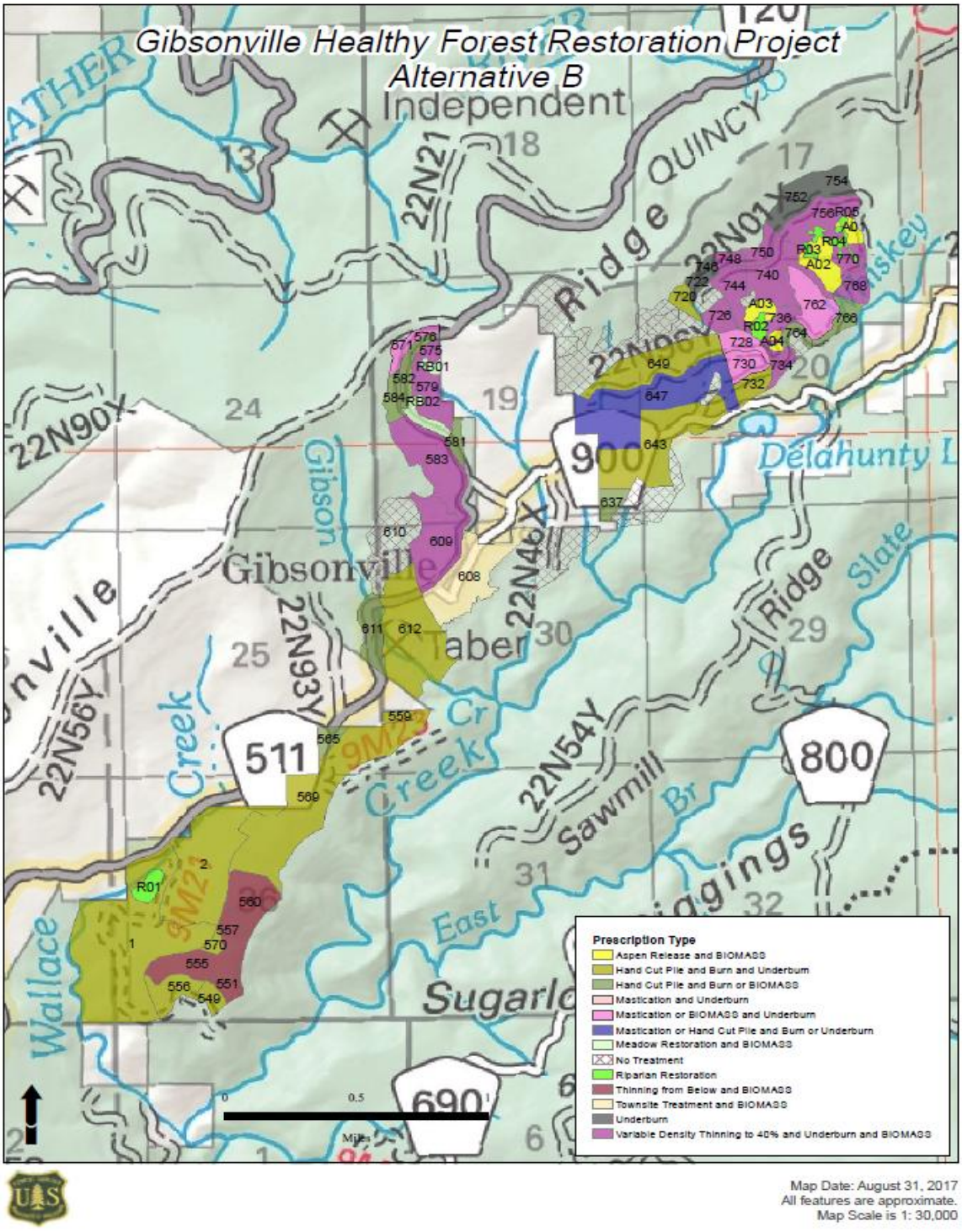

Figure 1. Gibsonville Project area with prescriptions for Alternative B.

DECISION RATIONALE

In response to public comment I requested the District interdisciplinary team (IDT) to draft a proposal that would meet the project purpose and need, for which cost and revenue estimates provide confidence that the project can be implemented in full with little or no supplemental funding, and that judicious applications of partial-harvest forestry, primarily commercial thinning, is intended to maintain or improve existing suitable habitat for California spotted owl in the short-term.

Currently, the Gibsonville Project area landscape is comprised of over-stocked stands that are at elevated risks to insects, diseases, and uncharacteristic wildfire. The western slope of the Sierra Nevada in the Plumas National Forest has a high rate of vegetation establishment and growth due to high annual precipitation and highly productive forest soils. Stands in the project area average 620-760 trees per acre. When precipitation is below normal for several consecutive years, trees become moisture-stressed and susceptible to insect infestations. Stands with high densities also increase stresses on larger more desirable retention trees due to increased inter-tree competition for finite site resources – particularly water during extended drought periods – which is interconnected to increases in bark beetle populations and subsequent tree mortality. Therefore, maintaining trees in good health and vigor reduces the risk of high levels of mortality during years of low water supply.

Sustaining existing infrastructure through the generation of income and employment opportunities for residents of the immediate area ensures the economic viability of implementing restoration projects. Further, receipts from sale of forest products can provide funding for noncommercial thinning and burning treatments that are crucially needed to achieve and maintain desired conditions on this landscape. In many cases, the forests have become so dense with smaller trees and brush that fire cannot safely or successfully be reintroduced without first reducing fuel loads.

Challenges and uncertainty face the management of habitat to support viable populations of the California spotted owl. Treatments that are consistent with habitat enhancement for spotted owls are likely to be very modest (e.g. removal of smaller diameter trees in dense stands, prescribed fires), given that the highest priority for these acres in the short term is to maintain or enhance habitat quality for spotted owls. The California spotted owl interim recommendations include no mechanical treatment within the territory unless it is intended to maintain or improve habitat conditions for the spotted owl in the short-term.

The proposed action (Alternative B), was designed to meet the multiple purposes and needs of the Gibsonville Project while balancing costs and revenues to attain a self-funding restoration project, as there is an abundance of service work and very little funding available to implement. The California spotted owl interim recommendations alternative (Alternative C) was designed to address the multiple purposes and needs while avoiding mechanical treatments within spotted owl territories.

For the purposes of historic town site protection, aspen release, meadow, alder, and riparian restoration the design goals resulted in the same treatments. Both alternatives offered the same amount of acres for variable density thinning, and biomass, and underburn, as well as acres of prescribed fire only.

Alternative C would replace treating 59.8 acres by thinning from below and 93.4 acres by mastication or biomass with hand cutting, piling, pile burning, and underburning. Alternative C would have similar, but less affect to forest health and stand attributes (i.e., basal area, trees per acre) and to fire resistant and resilient structure (diameter class distribution, heterogeneous stand structures) as Alternative B due to the reduction in scale. Pre-commercial thinning (thinning only trees less than 10 inches DBH) alone will not be as effective in reducing overall basal area and trees per acre when compared to commercial thinning (trees greater than 10 inches DBH).

Both alternatives were analyzed for economic costs and revenues. That analysis focused on revenues and treatment costs associated with implementing fuel reduction and forest health related activities. Negative net project values indicate an increased risk that the project may not attract bids, may not be implemented, or may require supplemental funding. If the analysis indicates that project costs exceed project revenues, the project may need to be modified. The economic analysis found that project costs for alternative C exceeded revenues by greater than $278,000.

My intent based on collaboration with shareholders, public comment, and review of the EA was to reach a decision that increased the net value of the whole project (a decision that had the highest expectation of being carried out in its entirety) while maintaining or improving habitat conditions, in the short-term, within existing suitable habitat for California spotted owl.

By removing even a small volume of merchantable sawlogs per acre that revenue can cover the cost of removing sapling and pole sized trees to the landing. Thinning from below treatments remove smaller, suppressed, and intermediate-crown class trees, and remove some codominant and dominate trees with crowns underneath or partially underneath healthy large trees. This allows for retention of the healthiest, largest, and tallest conifers and to avoid creating openings in the canopy cover. For these treatments, the prescription would also retain pole sized trees or tree clumps in openings or gaps in the overstory so as to maintain and improve forest complexity.

Hand-cutting can reduce trees per acre and basal area per acre as well as remove or rearrange ladder fuels. This treatment has an upper limit of trees 10 inches in diameter and costs $850-1,200 per acre with burning. However, in some stands this is the preferred treatment, especially to avoid mechanical treatments where the short-term benefit for spotted owl habitat conditions is not obvious. In no treatment stands, existing conditions would persist and develop unaltered by active management which does not meet the purpose and need for this project.

In instances where fire can be used to create desired conditions and improve habitat quality, the interim recommendations consider use of prescribed fire as a valuable and essential forest management tool. Where fire can be safely introduced as the primary treatment, project purpose and need is better met and therefore preferable to no treatment.

I understand that in order to realize the long term benefits of implementing the proposed treatments, there will be short term effects that must be understood and accepted. When implementing this project, the

Plumas National Forest will adhere to standards and guidelines to protect important wildlife habitat features and sensitive riparian areas, ensuring that any disturbance is eliminated or minimized and mitigated. The project specific design criteria and mitigations are meant to minimize any short term negative effects from the proposed action. Design criteria, best management practices (BMPs), and standard management requirements (SMRs) are incorporated into this decision.

My decision allows for treatments that will have beneficial effects, with consideration for any potential negative resource impacts. Many variables were considered in developing these actions and associated treatment unit specific prescriptions including purpose and need; California Wildlife Habitat Relationship (CWHR) type, size, and density classes; land allocation; Visual Quality Objectives; and guidance from the General Technical Report PSW-GTR-220, *An Ecosystem Management Strategy for Sierran Mixed-Conifer Forests* (USDA 2009) and the General Technical Report PSW-GTR-237, *Managing Sierra Nevada Forests*. Unit specific prescriptions (address Riparian Conservation Areas (RCA), CWHR system specific canopy cover (CC), and general retention size for trees.

During the EA comment period, the public expressed various concerns and observations about the Gibsonville Project. Individual comments are listed and addressed in Appendix A. The comments that were within the scope of and directly addressed the alternatives were related to economics, the interim recommendations, treatment effectiveness, and mechanical treatment within suitable CSO habitat.

I carefully considered the public's comments on the project and feel that my selection of these actions address their concerns and is the best course of action to promote and restore resiliency in the project area while promoting forest health, reducing fire behavior, and protecting wildlife habitat among other ecosystem concerns in the project area. I believe this decision is a step toward achieving an ecologically resilient landscape, recognizing the uncertainty of climate change and risk of future disturbances.

After considering the best available science, including science cited by commenters, I believe the scientific research analyzed for this project area was adequate for assessing the impacts of the action alternative to the environment. The project design features and mitigations will assure no significant environmental impact (see FONSI).

My rationale for deciding to implement this action is based on a review of the Gibsonville Project EA including project specific design features and mitigations and project record that reveals a thorough hard look at scientific information, consideration of public input, and opposing viewpoints, and the ability to meet the purpose and need for action, substantially improving resource conditions in the project area, while finding balance between costs and revenues.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Gibsonville Healthy Forest Restoration project has been listed on the Plumas National Forest schedule of proposed actions (SOPA) since October, 2015.

The Feather River Ranger District collaborates on Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP) with county and local Fire Safe Councils (FSC) that occupy lands within and bordering the District.

On October 26, 2015 the Feather River Ranger District sent letters to Estom Yumeka Tribe of Enterprise Rancheria, Tyme Maidu Tribe of Berry Creek Rancheria, Concow Maidu Tribe of Mooretown Rancheria, and Mechoopda Indian Tribe of Chico Rancheria. On November 3, the tribal administrator of Estom Yumeka Tribe of Enterprise Rancheria responded that the proposed project is not within the aboriginal territory of the tribe.

Public scoping letters were sent by email and mail to 84 individuals, organizations, institutions, industry representatives, and government agencies on October 26, 2015. The Forest Service published a legal notice asking for public input on the plan on November 3, 2015 in the Oroville Mercury-Register, the newspaper of record of the Feather River Ranger District. The Forest Service received written comments from USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Plumas and Sierra Counties, with offer to collaborate and Sierra Pacific Industries.

In their letter, Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI) commented that the project should be economically feasible. The project must have enough volume and value to cover the cost of cutting, skidding, processing, and shipping to the conversion facility. If work such as hand thinning and piling, mastication, road construction or reconstruction, and/or restoration work, is to be completed, that work must also be covered by the value of the product. No other issues were identified during public scoping.

On August 28, 2016 Forest and District staff hosted a field trip to the Gibsonville project area for industry representatives through the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC). On September 22, 2016 Bill Wickman, AFRC Consultant for California sent a letter noting the need to "sustain existing infrastructure for the economic viability of implementing restoration projects".

At other times outside scoping, Sierra Forest Legacy, the John Muir Project, the Center for Biological Diversity, and Dick Artley expressed interest in the progress of the project and when an EA would be available for public comment. On January 25, 2017 notice of the opportunity to comment on the EA was emailed to interested parties. On February 1, 2017 the Forest Service published a legal notice of the comment period in the Oroville Mercury-Register.

The Forest Service received written comments during the 30-day comment period from:

- Dick Artley, Retired Forest Service employee
- Scott Stawiarski, American Forest Resource Council
- Ben Solvesky, Sierra Forest Legacy
- Justin Augustine, Center for Biological Diversity
- John Preschutti, Plumas Forest Project
- Chad Hanson, John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute

The written comments are part of the project record and a list of comments and responses are contained in Appendix A.

On May 15, 2017, during objection resolution it was determined that the predicted product volume exceeded the District Ranger authority and lay with the Forest Supervisor. The District Ranger withdrew the draft Decision Notice. On May 16, 2017, the Forest Supervisor set aside the objections and announced plans to conduct a second public comment period and objection period in the near future after reviewing the project.

On October 18, 2017 a second notice of the opportunity to comment on the revised EA was emailed to interested parties. On October 18, 2017 the Forest Service published a legal notice of the second comment period in the Feather River Bulletin, the newspaper of record for the Plumas National Forest Supervisor.

The Forest Service received written comments from John Preschutti, of the Plumas Forest Project.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

I find that this project is consistent with the standards and guidelines for land management activities described in the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (PNF LRMP) as amended by the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision. Therefore, this project is consistent with the requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976. In addition, the Gibsonville Project complies with the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and other federal, state, and local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Administrative Review Opportunities

This proposed project is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and C.

Implementation Date

When the objection resolution period has been completed and the requirements set forth in 36 CFR 218.12 have been satisfied, implementation may begin immediately, pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and C. If no objection is filed, implementation may occur on the fifth day but no sooner from the end of the objection period.

Contact

The Gibsonville Project EA and supporting documents are available for public review at the Plumas National Forest, Feather River Ranger District, 875 Mitchell Avenue, Oroville, CA 95966 and online at:

https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=47960. It is also possible to navigate to the project website via the Plumas National Forest webpage (www.fs.fed.us/r5/plumas). Select the "Land and Resources Management" tab, then select "Browse through the Forest Projects," and then find the project name. For additional information concerning this decision, please contact Katherine A. Carpenter, Environmental Coordinator, Plumas National Forest, at 530-283-7742 or kacarpenter@fs.fed.us.

Date

DANIEL A. LOVATO
Forest Supervisor